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EXPLORING THE CONSUMPTION VALUE OF LAKSA IN MALAYSIAN GASTRONOMIC TOURISM: QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

Gastronomic tourism has emerged as a significant driver of cultural exchange, economic development, and destination branding. In Malaysia, a country renowned for its rich culinary diversity, traditional dishes like *laksa* play a central role in shaping the nation's food identity. This study explores the consumption value of laksa within the context of Malaysian gastronomic tourism from a qualitative perspective. Drawing on interviews with key stakeholders—local food vendors, tourists, and tourism authorities—the research investigates how different dimensions of consumption value (functional, emotional, social, epistemic, and cultural) influence tourists' engagement with laksa as a gastronomic experience. The findings reveal that laksa is perceived not only as a flavourful and affordable meal (functional value), but also as a medium of cultural storytelling and emotional connection (emotional and cultural value). Tourists often associate laksa with authenticity, heritage, and the sensory thrill of discovering local flavors, enhancing its epistemic appeal. Moreover, the communal nature of consuming laksa in vibrant hawker centres or food markets fosters social interactions and shared experiences, further enriching its consumption value.



Introduction

Gastronomic tourism has become one of the fastest-growing niche markets in the global tourism industry, providing destinations with opportunities to showcase their culinary heritage and stimulate local development (Dixit & Prayag, 2022; Richards, 2021). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2022) highlights that nearly 88% of destinations worldwide now identify gastronomy as a key motivator for travel, underscoring its global relevance. In Malaysia, food is more than sustenance, it represents cultural identity, diversity, and innovation. This makes gastronomy a powerful attraction for international and domestic tourists alike (Nursal, Karim, Karim, Ghazali, & Krauss, 2019).

However, alongside these opportunities, there are pressing issues related to sustainability and commercialization. Gastronomic tourism, if not carefully managed, can result in the over-commercialization of heritage food, loss of authenticity, strain on local resources, and environmental degradation (Koufadakis & Manola, 2020; Tibere & Aloysius, 2013). Furthermore, while Malaysia continues to market its food culture internationally, there is limited systematic research on how specific dishes contribute to sustainable tourism strategies (Sanip & Mustapha, 2020).

To contextualize its importance, Table 1 illustrates Malaysia's international tourist arrivals and estimated food-related expenditure, which highlight gastronomy's contribution to the economy.

Table 1: Tourist Arrivals and Food Expenditure in Malaysia (2019–2023)

Year	International Tourist Arrivals (Millions)	Est. Food Expenditure Contribution (RM billions)
2019	26.1	20.0
2020	4.3	3.2
2021	0.13	0.1
2022	10.1	7.8
2023	20.1	15.5

Source: (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC), 2023).

Within this broader context, laksa, a traditional noodle soup with regional variations such as Penang Assam Laksa, Johor Laksa, and Curry Laksa, emerges as a key culinary specialty with strong gastronomic value (Duruz, 2019; Nahar et al., 2018). Laksa is deeply embedded in Malaysia's culinary identity, reflecting diverse cultural influences, local ingredients, and regional preparation methods. Its popularity among both locals and international visitors positions it as a potential gastronomic brand for Malaysia.

Despite this potential, research on laksa's role in gastronomic tourism remains scarce. Existing scholarship often addresses broader culinary tourism themes without focusing on the sustainability implications of specific heritage foods. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the consumption value of laksa in Malaysian gastronomic tourism, examining how it contributes to cultural identity, tourist experiences, and sustainable development. Specifically, the objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate tourists' perceptions of laksa as a cultural and gastronomic symbol of Malaysia.
2. To analyse the role of laksa in promoting sustainable tourism practices.
3. To identify opportunities and challenges in leveraging laksa for Malaysia's gastronomic tourism strategy.

By addressing these objectives, this research contributes to the growing discourse on sustainable gastronomy while offering practical insights for tourism stakeholders in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Factors Motivating Tourists' Consumption Behavior

Understanding the factors that motivate tourists to consume local food is essential for destination marketing, gastronomic tourism development, and the enhancement of visitor experiences. Local food represents cultural heritage and identity, making it a valuable component of tourism experiences (Mak, Lumbers, & Eves, 2012). Previous research has examined tourists' food consumption through several perspectives, including food service quality, local food consumption patterns, gastronomic experiences, and food as a form of special interest tourism (Choe & Kim, 2018; Sanip, Mustapha, & Mohamed, 2022). These studies highlight that tourist food consumption behavior is shaped by socio-cultural, psychological, and contextual factors.

Tourists' cultural and religious backgrounds strongly influence their food preferences and taboos, which affect food choices while traveling (Mak et al., 2012). Similarly, socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education, and income also impact food-related decisions. Food-related personality traits, such as food neophobia (reluctance to try unfamiliar food) and food involvement, further explain tourists' willingness to consume local cuisine (Choe & Kim, 2018). Previous experiences, or the "exposure effect," significantly shape tourists' openness to local foods, where positive past experiences encourage further engagement with traditional cuisine (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Choe & Kim, 2018).

In addition, motivational drivers such as the quest for novelty, authenticity, and social interaction have been shown to influence food consumption (Sthapit, Björk, & Piramanayagam, 2023; Li & Qiu, 2024). The perceived image and reputation of a destination's culinary offerings also play a significant role, as destinations with strong gastronomic branding tend to attract tourists with food-related interests (Ibrahim, Shariffuddin, Zain, Salim, & Zainul, 2023; Kovalenko, Dias, Pereira, & Simões, 2023). Food availability has further been identified as a driver of tourist decision-making, highlighting the importance of ensuring that authentic local foods are accessible and promoted (Sanip et al., 2022).

Impacts of Local Food Consumption on Tourists' Experiences

Tourist food choices contribute not only to their personal experiences but also to the economic and cultural sustainability of destinations. Local food consumption supports local economies, stimulates agricultural diversification, enhances destination branding, and creates employment opportunities (Alsetoohy, Ayoun, Abukhalifeh, & Ahmad, 2021). Food has become an essential pillar of the tourism experience, with tourists increasingly seeking memorable and meaningful encounters through cuisine (Jeaheng, Kiatkawsin, & Lee, 2023).

Globalization, however, has raised concerns about homogenization, where cultural imperialism and the “McDonaldization” of food reduce the authenticity of local food experiences (Mak et al., 2012). Despite these challenges, empirical studies demonstrate that engagement with local food positively influences tourists’ attitudes toward destinations, strengthens food image perceptions, and enhances future revisit intentions (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2019; Soltani, Azadi, & Khosravi, 2020; Suntikul, Pratt, & Chan, 2019). Food consumption also contributes to destination loyalty, where cultural significance and sensory appeal create lasting tourist satisfaction (Jeaheng et al., 2023).

Local food experiences are increasingly integrated into destination marketing strategies as part of gastronomic tourism development (Kodaş & Aksoy, 2022). This integration strengthens the connection between local agriculture and tourism, supporting both heritage preservation and sustainable development (Fusté-Forné & Forné, 2021). Thus, food consumption plays a vital role not only in enhancing tourists’ experiences but also in contributing to the sustainability of local economies and cultural identities (Birch & Memery, 2020).

Theoretical Perspectives on Tourist Food Consumption

Beyond descriptive factors, scholars have applied theoretical frameworks to explain tourist food choices. The Consumption Value Theory (Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991) has been widely used to analyse how functional, emotional, social, epistemic, and conditional values influence food decisions (Hsu, 2022; Jeaheng et al., 2023). This theory provides a holistic understanding of how tourists evaluate local food beyond mere sustenance.

The Authenticity Theory (Cohen, 1988) highlights how tourists seek “real” cultural experiences through food, with authenticity serving as a powerful motivator (Sthapit et al., 2023). Likewise, the Experience Economy framework (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) demonstrates how memorable experiences are co-created through gastronomy, linking food directly to tourism satisfaction and loyalty (Li & Qiu, 2024). Finally, the Sustainability Framework underscores the need to balance gastronomic tourism development with environmental, social, and cultural sustainability (UNWTO, 2022; Chan, 2025).

Summary of Past Findings

To provide a clearer understanding of the evolution of research on tourist local food consumption, Table summarises key studies conducted between 2018 and 2025. This summary highlights the study contexts, theoretical frameworks applied, and major findings relevant to local food and gastronomic tourism. Presenting the past findings in tabular form allows for a more systematic review, offering insights into the progression of knowledge and identifying areas that remain underexplored.

Table 2: Summary of Past Studies on Tourist Local Food Consumption (2018–2025)

Author(s), Year	Context	Theory/ Framework	Key Findings	Contribution to Present Study
Mak et al. (2012)	Global	Socio-cultural factors	Cultural, demographic, and motivational influences shape food consumption. Past experience and attitudes	Foundational but outdated baseline.
Choe & Kim (2018)	South Korea	Food Neophobia/ Involvement	predict willingness to try local food.	Shows role of prior food experience.
Sthapit, Björk, & Piramanayagam (2023)	Europe	Authentic Theory	Quest for authenticity drives local food choices. Sensory and cultural values strongly influence food motivations.	Aligns with laksa as cultural heritage. Supports focus on consumption value.
Jeaheng, Kiatkawsin, & Lee (2023)	Thailand	Consumption Value Theory		
Li & Qiu (2024)	China		Local food enhances memorable tourism experiences and loyalty.	Links food to overall satisfaction.
Ibrahim et al. (2023)	Malaysia	Destination Food Image	Culinary reputation shapes tourist perceptions. Food availability plays a critical role in attracting tourists	Relates to laksa as Malaysia's food image. Connects gastronomy to sustainability.
Sanip, Mustapha, & Mohamed (2022)	Malaysia	Sustainability Perspective	AI-based promotion enhances sustainable gastronomy.	Suggests innovation in food marketing.
Chan (2025)	Global	Sustainable Tourism Framework		

Source: (Adapted from various sources, 2012 – 2025)

As shown in Table 2, recent studies on tourist local food consumption have adopted diverse theoretical perspectives, including the Consumption Value Theory (Jeaheng et al., 2023; Hsu, 2022), Authenticity Theory (Sthapit et al., 2023), and the Experience Economy framework (Li & Qiu, 2024). These frameworks highlight that food consumption is not merely functional but also carries cultural, social, and experiential value. Importantly, studies conducted in Malaysia (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Sanip et al., 2022) underscore the role of food image and availability in shaping tourist choices, though specific culinary icons such as *laksa* remain underexplored. While much of the literature emphasizes local food's contribution to destination branding and tourist satisfaction, relatively fewer studies explicitly connect local cuisine to sustainable tourism outcomes, particularly in Southeast Asia. This gap provides the foundation for the present study, which examines the consumption value of *laksa* as both a cultural heritage and a driver of sustainable gastronomic tourism in Malaysia.

Methodology

Qualitative methodology of in-depth interviews was employed in this research to explore the consumption value of *laksa* within the context of Malaysian gastronomic tourism. The aim of this approach is to uncover rich, in-depth insights into how the key stakeholders perceive, experience, and assign values to *laksa* consumption. The in-depth interviews were conducted from mid-February 2025 until May 2025. A total of 15 participants were interviewed until thematic saturation was reached, where no new information or themes emerged from additional interview (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Participants' background was strictly confidential, comprising of 15 participants, aged between 21 to 55 years old. The participants were segregated into three categories: local food vendors, local tourists and tourism stakeholders who came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities and localities in Malaysia. The participants were recruited through a composite of convenience sampling technique, comprising of purposive sampling method. This method allowed the inclusion of participants with diverse but relevant insights (Patton, 2015). As asserted by Guest et al. (2006), fifteen participants in a homogenous group are adequate to achieve saturation of data interviews. The homogenous group for this study refers to the three groups of participants as they are expected to be familiar with the value consumption of *laksa*.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted between 30 to 60 minutes, using English and Malay language, depending on the participant's preference, and took place in setting relevant to gastronomic tourism, such as night market, food festivals and hawker centres in Klang valley. Interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated where necessary, ensuring the preservation of meaning. A pilot qualitative test was conducted to test the clarity, flow and the duration of the interview on 3 adults aged between 20 to 40 before the actual interviews take place. To ensure trustworthiness, strategies such as member checking and maintaining reflexive awareness was carried out throughout the study. All the information gathered from the interviews were then transcribed, coded, and thematically analyse (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Table 3 below summarizes the participant's profile for this study.

Table 3 Participant's Profile

Category	Code	Age	Race	Gender	Education level
Local food vendors	FV1	54	Malay	Female	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
	FV2	48	Malay	Female	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
	FV3	50	Malay	Male	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
	FV4	38	Malay	Male	Diploma
	FV5	42	Chinese	Female	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
Local Tourist	LT1	25	Malay	Male	Bachelor's degree
	LT2	40	Malay	Female	Bachelor's degree
	LT3	20	Malay	Male	Diploma
	LT4	24	Chinese	Male	Bachelor's degree
	LT5	23	Indian	Male	Diploma
Tourism	TS1	42	Bidayuh	Female	Master's degree
Stakeholders	TS2	38	Malay	Male	Master's degree
	TS3	42	Chinese	Female	Master's degree
	TS4	53	Malay	Female	Master's degree
	TS5	38	Malay	Female	Doctor of Philosophy

Findings and Discussions

Participants Characteristics

A total of 15 participants aged between 20 to 54 were recruited for this study. 4 of the participants are from the age range of 20 to 30, 3 participants are from the age range of 31 to 40, 5 participants are from the age range of 41 to 50, and 3 participants are from the age range of 51 to 60 respectively. 8 of the participants were female (53.3%) while another 7 were males (46.7%). Regarding races, most of the participants were Malays (10 participants, 66%), followed by Chinese (3 participants, 20%), Indian (1 participant, 7%) and Bidayuh participant (1 participant, 7%). As for the education level, there was mixture of qualifications with 4 participants completed their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) (26.7%), 3 diploma's (20%), 3 bachelor's degree (20%), 4 master's degree (26.7%) and 1 Doctor of Philosophy degree (6.6%).

The Consumption Values of Laksa

From the in-depth interviews conducted with the 3 categories of participants, five consumption values were recognized which influences their engagement with laksa that contributes to the whole gastronomic experiences. Each of these values have its own characteristics, which differs from one to another, ranging from functional value, emotional value, social value, epistemic value, as well as cultural value. Table 4. summarise the key findings of the consumption value of laksa in Malaysian gastronomic tourism context.

Table 4 Consumption Value of Laksa in Malaysian Gastronomic Tourism

Themes	Key findings
Functional value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional variation in taste and quality • Taste as the primary consumption driver • Importance of fresh and authentic ingredients
Emotional value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquired taste of Laksa • Comfort and satisfaction • Emotional and nostalgic associations • Local vendors' emotional connection • Memorable tourist experience
Social Value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared social experiences enhance enjoyment • Family and early exposure influence taste development • Laksa as a social connector among tourists and locals • Cultural Curiosity and Learning Through Food • Influence of Word-of-Mouth and social media • Marketing as a social driver • Creation of shared memories and traditions
Epistemic Value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curiosity Driven by Reputation and Recommendations • Regional Variation Enhances Culinary Exploration • Laksa as a Reflection of Malaysia's Multiculturalism • Diversity in Taste Prevents Culinary Monotony • Family Influence on Food Curiosity and Perception • Recognition of Regional Cooking Styles
Cultural Value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unity in culinary diversity • Enhanced cultural appreciation through food exploration • Cultural and historical narratives in recipes • Reflection of multicultural influence • Food as a medium of cultural transmission • Deepened respect for National Cuisine

Functional Value

Participants in the study noted that the quality and taste of laksa vary according to the state or region it represents, reflecting the diversity of local ingredients and culinary traditions within Malaysia. Despite this variation, laksa is consistently described by participants as a rich, flavourful, and authentic dish, often served with a creamy broth and fresh toppings (LT1, LT2, LT3 and LT5; FV1 and FV3; TS1, TS3 and TS4). These findings reinforce the notion that regional culinary identity plays a key role in shaping food perceptions and consumer expectations (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). The sensory experience of laksa—especially its distinctive taste—emerged as a central aspect of its appeal, aligning with prior studies that emphasize the role of authenticity and regionality in the consumption of traditional dishes (Everett & Aitchison, 2008).

Affordability and portion size were also highlighted as important considerations among participants when choosing to consume laksa. Most participants agreed that reasonably priced laksa, served in generous portions and sold at locations perceived as authentic and trustworthy, positively influenced their decision to eat it (FV1, FV2, FV4 and FV5; LT2, LT3 and LT4; TS1, TS3 and TS4). However, taste remained the primary factor that drove consumption. This

supports previous findings that while price and accessibility contribute to food choices, taste and perceived authenticity are often the most influential factors in culinary tourism and food-related decision-making (Kim, Eves, & Scarles, 2009).

From the perspective of local food vendors, the preparation and freshness of ingredients are vital to meeting customer expectations. Particular emphasis was placed on the types of fish used in the broth and the variety of fresh side ingredients such as cucumber, red chilies, fresh salad leaves, boiled eggs, and calamansi (FV1, FV3 and FV5). Vendors believed that careful attention to these elements not only enhanced the flavor but also helped to maintain the integrity and cultural value of the dish. This view aligns with the broader discourse on food heritage, which underscores the importance of ingredient selection and preparation methods in preserving culinary authenticity (Bessière, 2013).

Emotional value

Several participants shared that their initial experiences with laksa during childhood were marked by an intense and unfamiliar flavour profile. For some, the strong and complex taste of the dish was overwhelming at first; however, with repeated consumption, they eventually developed a liking for it (LT1 and LT3; TS1, TS2 and TS5). This reflects the notion that certain traditional dishes, particularly those with bold and unique flavors, may require an acquired taste, a concept supported by previous research on local food acceptance (Tan, 2019). Despite the initial hesitation, laksa was later described as comforting and satisfying by many respondents. A few participants expressed that the familiar and rich taste of laksa brought a sense of emotional warmth and contentment, which contributed to their overall dining satisfaction (LT1, LT2 and LT4; TS3, TS4 and TS5). This finding aligns with existing literature that highlights the emotional and sensory comfort associated with traditional cuisine (Yusof & Aziz, 2020).

Beyond its sensory appeal, laksa was also strongly associated with emotional and nostalgic value. A majority of participants indicated that eating laksa triggered vivid personal memories, such as family bonding moments, childhood experiences, and shared meals with friends or during holiday trips (FV1, FV2, FV3, FV4 and FV5; LT1, LT3 and LT5; TS1, TS2, TS3 and TS5). Such experiences support the idea that food plays a crucial role in memory recall and emotional connectivity, particularly within the context of cultural identity (Sims, 2009).

For local food vendors, the meaning of laksa extends beyond its flavor and popularity. Several vendors (FV1, FV2 and FV4) noted that laksa symbolizes the hardships and challenges they have endured in sustaining their livelihoods. The process of preparing and selling laksa serves as a reminder of familial resilience and perseverance. Moreover, vendors emphasized the importance of preserving and passing down traditional culinary knowledge to the next generation, viewing food as a form of heritage and cultural continuity (FV1, FV2 and FV5). This sentiment is consistent with findings from food heritage studies, which suggest that traditional dishes often serve as vehicles of intergenerational knowledge and identity (Bessière, 2013). Furthermore, a few participants highlighted that consuming laksa was one of the most enjoyable aspects of their holiday experiences in Malaysia. These encounters enhanced their appreciation for regional culinary practices and fostered a deeper connection to local culture (LT1, LT3 and LT5). This finding supports previous research indicating that local cuisine significantly contributes to tourist satisfaction and destination identity (Okumus, Okumus, & McKercher, 2007).

Social Value

The consumption of laksa carries strong social value, as it is often embedded in shared experiences that enhance its memorability and enjoyment. Participants highlighted that trying laksa in the company of friends made the experience more fun and engaging, particularly when sharing reactions and experimenting with different regional versions (LT1, LT2, LT3, LT4 and LT5; TS2, TS3 and TS5). This aligns with previous research indicating that food consumption in social contexts can heighten enjoyment and foster social bonding (Mak et al., 2012).

First-time encounters with laksa frequently occurred during family meals, with some participants expressing that although they disliked the strong flavors as children, their appreciation grew over time, contributing to a shared culinary journey within the family (FV1, FV2 and FV3; LT3 and LT4; TS2 and TS3). Laksa also functions as a cultural connector, especially among tourists, as it is a commonly sought-after dish that facilitates shared experiences and social interaction during travel as asserted by a few participants (LT1, LT2 and LT5). The regional diversity of laksa was found to stimulate cultural curiosity and dialogue, with participants showing interest in exploring the different versions offered across Malaysian states, thus learning through food (LT3 and LT5; TS1, TS2 and TS5).

In addition, social influences such as word-of-mouth recommendations, online reviews, and social media were identified as powerful motivators for trying laksa, often shaping individuals' culinary decisions through digital and interpersonal trust (LT1, LT2 and LT5; TS1, TS3, TS4 and TS5). These findings are consistent with studies showing that social media and visual marketing significantly affect food-related behaviors and enhance the social appeal of local dishes (Okumus et al., 2007; Yeap et al., 2021).

Epistemic Value

Participants' curiosity to try laksa was primarily driven by its reputation as a must-try Malaysian dish known for its unique flavors and authentic local ingredients. This curiosity was often sparked by observing family members, such as mothers and siblings, who ordered laksa, encouraging personal interest and willingness to try the dish (FV1 and FV3; LT1, LT2, and LT5; TS2, TS3 and TS4). Such familial influence aligns with studies that highlight the role of family socialization in shaping food preferences and exploratory eating behaviors (Rozin, 2007).

The regional variations of laksa across Malaysia, each with its distinct preparation style, ranging from spiciness to sweetness, motivated participants to explore and compare the different versions. According to the participants, each of the states have their own unique ways of representing laksa, and the taste varies from one another depending on the ingredients which was used to prepare the dish. This encouraged a broader appreciation for Malaysia's rich culinary diversity and encouraged gastronomic exploration of various regional specialties (FV2, FV3 and FV4; LT2, LT3 and LT4; TS1 and TS3). These experiences reflect the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of Malaysian cuisine, which is celebrated for its multicultural influences and regional uniqueness (Hashim & Othman, 2018).

Moreover, participants recognized laksa as an embodiment of Malaysia's multicultural identity, with its complex flavors illustrating the fusion of cultural traditions. The availability of diverse tastes within Malaysian cuisine was appreciated for keeping the culinary experience exciting and preventing monotony, a factor shown to enhance tourist satisfaction and

engagement (Henderson, 2009). Participants' shifting perceptions from viewing laksa as a single dish to understanding its multiple regional styles illustrate how food experiences contribute to cultural learning and identity formation through consumption (Mohamed & Mohd Noor, 2015).

Cultural Value

Participants consistently recognized laksa as a dish that exemplifies Malaysia's cultural and culinary diversity. Despite the noticeable differences in flavor and ingredients across states, none of the participants perceived one version as more "correct" than another. Rather, all variations were accepted as equally valid and authentically "Malaysian," reflecting a shared understanding and respect for regional uniqueness within a national culinary identity (FV1 and FV4; LT2, LT4 and LT5; TS2, TS3 and TS5). This finding aligns with Hashim and Othman (2018), who emphasize that Malaysian food culture encourages the coexistence of multiple interpretations of the same dish, reinforcing unity in diversity. The acceptance of laksa's variations illustrates how food serves as a unifying cultural symbol while still celebrating regional distinction.

Eating laksa was reported to deepen participants' appreciation for Malaysia's rich food culture. As participants tried different versions of the dish, they became more interested in exploring regional ingredients, preparation methods, and tastes (LT1, LT2 and LT5). This experiential engagement supports the idea that gastronomy can act as a medium for cultural education and cross-cultural understanding (Mak et al., 2012). By actively seeking out various types of laksa, participants demonstrated a growing awareness of and respect for Malaysia's culinary diversity, reinforcing the role of food tourism in shaping cultural appreciation and curiosity.

Participants also expressed a newfound respect for the historical and familial significance embedded in laksa. For instance, a local vendor shared how their recipe had been passed down through generations and explained the distinct characteristics of regional styles (LT1 and LT3; TS3 and TS5). This experience highlighted how food practices are not only culinary but also historical and symbolic in nature. Such narratives reveal the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, where food functions as a living heritage (Bessière, 1998). As Mohamed and Mohd Noor (2015) note, traditional dishes in Malaysia are deeply connected to identity, with each recipe telling a story of cultural survival and adaptation over time. Additionally, participants also noted that laksa is a culinary fusion of Malay, Chinese, and Indian influences, underscoring Malaysia's multi-ethnic roots (LT1, LT3 and LT5; TS1 and TS5). This blend of flavors and traditions within one dish represents the broader sociocultural reality of Malaysia, where diverse communities coexist and influence one another. Laksa thus becomes a symbolic food, showcasing how multiculturalism is manifested through cuisine. According to Henderson (2009), food in multicultural societies often acts as a reflection of shared history and integration. In this way, laksa is more than a dish—it is a cultural artifact that embodies national identity, intercultural harmony, and culinary innovation.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant cultural, social, and experiential values associated with the consumption of laksa in Malaysia. The findings reveal that laksa serves not only as a popular local delicacy but also as a powerful medium through which Malaysian cultural identity, heritage, and multicultural influences are expressed and appreciated. Participants emphasized the diversity of laksa across regions, noting that each variation is embraced equally and

contributes to a collective sense of national pride. The act of consuming laksa was shown to deepen cultural understanding and appreciation, particularly when participants engaged with the stories and traditions surrounding the dish.

Moreover, the study demonstrates that laksa consumption facilitates intergenerational knowledge transfer, cultural learning, and identity reinforcement. The sharing of recipes and narratives by local vendors further enhances the symbolic value of the dish, turning a simple culinary experience into one of historical and emotional significance. Additionally, the multicultural fusion inherent in laksa reflects Malaysia's ethnic diversity and harmonious coexistence, positioning laksa as more than food, it is a representation of Malaysian unity through diversity.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on consumption value theory and gastronomic tourism by illustrating how local foods embody not just functional and sensory attributes but also cultural, symbolic, and sustainability values. Practically, the findings provide insights for tourism stakeholders, culinary entrepreneurs, and policymakers to leverage laksa as a sustainable gastronomic tourism product, integrating it into destination branding, culinary festivals, and educational initiatives. In terms of policy and law, the study underscores the need for stronger cultural heritage protection frameworks to safeguard traditional recipes, cooking practices, and the livelihoods of small-scale food vendors.

Despite its contributions, the study encountered several challenges, including limited generalizability due to the qualitative nature of the findings and potential biases arising from participant subjectivity. Future studies could expand the sample size, adopt mixed-method approaches, and compare laksa consumption with other iconic Malaysian dishes to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how globalization, modernization, and sustainability concerns may reshape the role of traditional foods in gastronomic tourism.

In conclusion, laksa not only satisfies gastronomic desires but also fosters social connection, cultural appreciation, and national identity. Moving forward, there is potential to improve the promotion of laksa by embracing digital marketing, culinary innovation, and cross-cultural collaborations. Such initiatives would not only enhance Malaysia's gastronomic tourism appeal but also contribute to preserving its rich culinary heritage for future generations.

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